GATHER THE PEOPLE
Torah-Inspired Community Organizing and Development
www.gatherthepeople.org

SEEKING AND ATTAINING PERSONAL CLOSENESS TO GOD, THE CREATOR AND MASTERMIND OF CREATION

By Rabbi Moshe ben Asher & Magidah Khulda Bat Sarah

"How can I get closer to God? How can I feel God's presence in my life?" These are questions we ask when we feel a spiritual need, something within us that seeks higher meaning and purpose, a longing to go beyond the endless feedback loop of our own limited imagination and appetites and their gratification.

Our dissatisfaction may deepen when we begin to see that our treasured moral autonomy,[1] measuring goodness by what feels good to us personally—what's convenient, comfortable, and career-enhancing—often is not durable. It doesn't produce long-lived fulfillment and happiness. It doesn't relieve our recurring feelings of emptiness, fragmentation, and futility. For some, that awareness comes with the despair that shadows days of feeling powerless to alter the external conditions and internal disabilities that poison our happiness. We may even reify such circumstances, convinced that it's all just the way life is, that it's far beyond anyone's power to change.

But in those moments we may also admit that we don't always know or live up to what will turn out to be rewarding for ourselves and our loved ones, our community, our business, and even our nation. We may be forced to admit to ourselves that we're not the best judges of right and wrong that should guide our lives to make them meaningful and satisfying.

We may come to a point of desperation, a crisis of recognition that we're not in control of everything and we don't have all the answers to life's challenges, when it feels like we may go over the edge. We can try to ignore the wreckage of our own lives and that of family, community, and democracy all around us, rationalizing our own way through the wasteland of abandoned moral-spirituality.

But it's also possible then, if we're looking for help, to see we don't have to be the victim of circumstances beyond our control or the self-sabotaging victim of our own personality and character defects. We can admit without reservations, that we don't own and control everything. We can admit we have been acting foolishly, like immature know-it-alls who do think they own and control everything but in fact possess nothing of true and lasting value. It's possible to find the hope and faith we can change ourselves if we consider making our way with the Torah to guide us. Then we can swim against the tide and choose to live with moral clarity and purpose by getting closer to the Source of our existence, to God, the *righteous*[2] Creator and Mastermind of Creation.

The answer to the question of *how* to do that depends on whether we mean "closer" from our point of view or God's. If it's about our limited experience as one of humankind, then whatever gives us joy, a feeling of releasing our tensions and stress, makes us want to laugh and sing—gets us out of ourselves—*feels* like we're closer to God.

Perhaps you have tried to get closer to God from your point of view and, for a few moments or hours or even days, you had feelings and thoughts of being near to God. But you discovered it didn't have any staying power. It didn't transform the hum-drum quality, the emotional and spiritual drudgery of your day-to-day life. It didn't radically change the deep disharmony within you, which often left you questioning the meaning of your life and how you've been living it. And maybe it didn't meaningfully change your ungainly relationships at home, at work, and at play. Perhaps, nothing about your life left you truly fulfilled, contented, and at *peace*.[3] Nothing remedied your deeper aimlessness, regardless of your commitments to work or relationships or recreation, despite having achieved a great deal of mastery in those realms.

Torah Judaism, however, approaches the question of how to get close to God from *God's* point of view. That *we* are not the source of all truth ought to be obvious in so far as we're seeking to get close to *the Source* of everything. The question then becomes: How can I get close to God from God's point of view?

In Genesis 15:1, the Torah describes how Abraham got much closer to God: "… the word of Adonai came to Abram[4] in a vision, saying, Fear not, Abram; I am your shield, and your *reward* [שְׂכָרְךָ] will be great."[5] (Emphasis added.)

Abraham's existence was about to be radically reordered, from his personal journey, with its challenges and accomplishments, as guided by God, to a life in which the future of the entire people would devolve upon him.[6] Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) illuminates the import of the changes: "Up till now Abraham was respected and valued and

loved for his good heart and personality. Now something higher is demanded from him, and that is, doing all these good deeds as a duty, as a law to be obeyed, obeyed from his free-willed submission to the Law of God,[7] so that he becomes, of his own free will that which all other creations are forced to be by their very nature."[8]

One way we may understand the assurances he received is that God will charge and commission him far beyond what he could ever have imagined his own capabilities to be and, in doing so, Abram will learn that his much greater potential as a servant of God (*eved Hashem*—עֶבֶד הַשֵּׁם) is itself, extraordinarily fulfilling. Moreover, that his fears and anxieties, whether of inadequacy or failure, will somehow be shielded from the worst effects he can imagine.

What is the outcome when, in response to the challenge of a *mitzvah* (מִצְוָה—commandment) that raises all our fears, we reach far beyond what we believe our limitations to be? When we choose[9] to fulfill such a commandment, like risking our life to stand up for justice, simply because God teaches us to resist injustice, we reap a remarkable reward: the experience we have when we use the best part of ourself, our soul, given to us by God, to add our special goodness to the goodness in the world which God has created and directs. Then we know *personally* the wonder and beauty of allying ourself to God in the creation and masterminding of goodness in the world.

Then, too, we also come to know first-hand the farthest reaches of our soul, that ability to add unique goodness in the world, a gift the Creator breathed into our species. It brings to our mind an unmatched awareness of the closeness of our Creator (*kiravat elokim*—קִרְבַת אֱלֹקִים).[10]

When we realign our will and actions in this way, we are palpably accompanied from moment to moment in daily life by the Creator and Mastermind of Creation. Thus we come to experience what Psalm 73:28 describes: "But as for me, the nearness of God is my good; I have made the Lord God my refuge, that I may tell of all Your works."[11]

The hurdle we face in attaining closeness to God is that God is a spirit—non-material (בְּלִתִי גוּף). We can no more comprehend the incorporeality of God than we can know how our own incorporeal mind works. That is, the ability of our *soul-mind* (*neshama deiah*—נְשָׁמָה-דֵּעָה) to understand the spiritual and emotional meaning of *moral freedom*,[12] and to use our intellect, reasoning and creativity to act on that understanding. It's a capability that contemporary neurobiology has demonstrated to exist operationally apart from, and regulates, the brain.

The *spiritual* essence of our soul-mind, which we experience through the *physical* brain, in much the way we experience the *spiritual* essence of God (as described to us in the Torah), is through the *physical* creation. It's a parallel spirituality that links us to God, the Creator of our soul-mind, Who "breathed into" us (i.e., implanted) our spiritual ability to ally ourself to God's unfolding and masterminding of the Creation.

The DIY details of bringing to life the spiritual nexus between God and oneself may be illustrated by considering how we get close to a spiritual essence other than God—say, *truth*, for example. Then one's questions would be, "How can I get closer to the truth? How can I feel the presence of truth in my life? Of course, since in essence truth is spiritual, without inherent physicality, we can only get close to it by actually living the qualities we ascribe to it. In other words, we can only get close to it when we tell the truth,[13] especially when other lives and significant spiritual values, such as justice and compassion, are at stake.

Consider again, we know the spirit of God through its expression in the physical world, which is the same way we know our own spirit, our soul-mind, by its expression in the physical world. The human soul-mind regulates the brain, which directs the rest of the embodied neural system that governs the musculature, that finally powers our physical movement.[14] We shall never understand the spirit we call God any more than we shall ever fully understand the fundamental character of our own spirit, except as a gift we receive, unlike all other creatures, in the image of our Creator. Likewise, we can never truly know God's incorporeal spirit. But we can comprehend how God's spirit is manifested in the Creation, which is revealed to us in its physical and spiritual lawfulness (the cause of which, the scientific laws of physics cannot illuminate).

We know the physical lawfulness of the Creation from physics, chemistry, astronomy, engineering, and the like. None of us doubt the lawfulness of gravity or innumerable other scientific laws. But for some of us, it's much harder to accept the spiritual lawfulness of the Creation, which nevertheless is true.

The *mitzvah* to tell the *truth*,[15] for example, is a *spiritual law*. Not only because we can read it in the Torah; but because, given the unity and integration of God's Creation, there is a kind of dialectical link between physical and moral-spiritual laws, such that a lie will inevitably influence some aspect of the physical universe because of its lawfulness. It's a lesson most of us learn in childhood: one lie inevitably leads to another lie, and another, and another, until the whole edifice of deceit crumbles when their effects encounter the lawfulness of physical life and we're caught up in the blowback of our wrongdoing, sometimes immediately, sometimes long-delayed, sometimes personally, sometimes indirectly by the effects our lies have on loved ones, friends, and others.

The point is, the spiritual lawfulness of the Creation is not equivalent to having laws written into statute books, which may or may not be enforced, depending on police and prosecution resources, the weather, or sheer dumb luck. Instead, the righteous *justice* of God's spiritual laws has been integrated into the moral-spiritual infrastructure[16] of human society. They are always enforced—sometimes within minutes, sometimes they take a lifetime.

Abraham's life is changed from a personal journey in which his navigation was guided by God, but his day to day choices and actions were governed by his essential goodness. His transformation entailed the

replacement of that autonomy to his absolute reliance the observance of the law of God in all his actions.

We too can get close to God by rousing our soul-mind, our inherent, distinctly human potential to act on the vision and path of the Torah, which carry us far beyond the limitations of self-interest, even at great personal cost. In doing so, we close the distance between us and the Creator's lawfulness of the physical and spiritual worlds. And we get close to God according to what God regards as rewarding, which is revealed to us in God's Law, the *mitzvot*,[17] which govern the Creation.

This is why Torah-Judaism has taught that we only get close to God on God's terms by fulfilling the *mitzvot* given to us in the Torah, committing ourselves to its demands for righteousness, truth, justice, freedom, peace, and compassion. Since everything else is diversionary self-delusion, which we engage in to relieve the anomie and alienation that comes with the endlessly unfulfilling, mindless pursuit of material and sensual rewards—which in time lead many of us on a round-about path to discover our hoped-for life of meaning, clarity and purpose in spiritual rewards, as Abraham did.

But as we discover when we learn more about Abraham's life, aligning our spirit with the spirit of God entails a potentially much greater commitment—*Kiddush Hashem*, the sanctification of God's name.

As Rabbi Hirsch explains in his commentary on Leviticus 22:32—"… in ordinary circumstances it is only ע״ז ג״ע וש״ד, only in the laws concerning idolatry, sexual immorality, and murder that one has to make their observance out-weigh the value of life itself, of them it says that in all circumstances יהרג ואל יעבור, 'one must let oneself be killed rather than transgress the Law.' But, בתוך בני ישראל, if it is a case of בפרהסיא, openly, publicly, in the midst of a Jewish community (in the presence of ten adults, which is always taken as an עדה, as representing the Jewish community), if in such circumstances the transgression of the Torah is forced on us with the threat of death, or בשעת גזרת המלכות in times of the persecution of the Jews, where the fury of persecution of the nations has proclaimed a war of extinction against Judaism as well as Jewry, in these cases עפילו מצוה קלה, even the smallest law, ואפילו לשנויי ערקתא דמסאנא, even if it is only a question of deviation of an established custom in Jewry regarding a shoe-lace, may not be transgressed to save one's life. In such cases it says repeatedly: יהרג ואל יעבור, the glorification of the Name of God, קידוש השם [*Kiddush Hashem*], by Jewish faithfulness to the Torah has to be confirmed even at the price of death."

To sanctify the name of God means that, under limited circumstances, explicitly defined in Torah Judaism, we re prepared to risk or even lose our lives to uphold the potential for the *righteousness*, *truth*, *justice*, *freedom*, *peace* and *compassion* with which God has endowed humankind, to ensure that these attributes of God prevail in the face of evil. It's akin to what young men and women willingly undertook to prevail over the death-dealing evil of Nazi fascism during World War II. The difference is that as Jews guided by the Torah, we make that commitment not only in special historical moments but every day throughout our lives—which we know as *Kiddush Hashem*.

If you're attracted to what it would be like personally to get close to God, you may wonder how your day-to-day life would change.

Imagine the ancient Sanctuary where God's glory was reflected by the priests teaching the way to live according to God's gift of the *mitzvot,* which would transform the world. Similarly, each of us can become a Sanctuary of God, a mobile sanctuary of Torah teaching that radiates the beauty of the divine path. We too can reflect the light of God's grace in our personal relationships, in our homes, our community, and everywhere we go. It doesn't take the place of what we usually do in life, yet it transforms the meaning of everything, for us and for all those around us—not with words but unfailing Torah-guided deeds. *Imagine*….

[1] Nowadays,"autonomy" in America is widely regarded as the criterion of personal life that trumps all other values. Sociologically, dedication to moral autonomy has evolved into a cultural phenomenon of mass narcissistic self-preoccupation, self-conceit, and self-entitlement, weakening the institutions of family, community, enterprise, and government. This incarnation of autonomy is a far cry from its etymological history, beginning in ancient Greece, where *autonomia*, from *auto-nomos*, referred to the self-governing city-state. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, autonomy was a much-considered concept in moral and political philosophy, often in relation to an individual's "personal liberty" within a broader political context.

[2] God's Sovereignty may be thought to be righteously exercised because it is not random but gauged to our actions, on whether they uplift and dignify humankind in particular and the Creation generally or degrade and destroy them, always judging us according to the Torah's *mitzvot* that clarify the choices we have and their eventual consequences.

[3] Peace (*shalom*—שָׁלוֹם) is understood as *completeness*—that one's life achieves an otherwise impossible harmony based on the total integration of body, mind, and spirit with God's commandments (*mitzvot*), which have been gifted to us in the Torah as the best means to navigate the Creation and align our will with Divine Providence. However, the conceptual essentials of *shalom* apply not only to our personal life but also to our communities, politics, environmental policies, and international relations.

[4] Abraham's name before it was changed in Exodus 17:4-5

[5] אַחַר הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה הָיָה דְבַר-יְהוָה אֶל-אַבְרָם בַּמַּחֲזֶה לֵאמֹר אַל-תִּירָא אַבְרָם אָנֹכִי מָגֵן לָךְ שְׂכָרְךָ הַרְבֵּה מְאֹד

[6] Rabbi Hirsch comments on Genesis 18:19, that "The task for which Abraham is to bring up his descendants is called לשמר דרך ה', to keep to the path indicated by God, and לעשות צדקה ה' practising acts of duty and justice. The former carries out the התהלך לפני ה' והיות תמים the holy pure moral life before God, to which Mila lays the foundation, and the latter, living humanely and benevolently with one's fellow men as was shown in the example set by Abraham. Together they constitute the most complete contrast to Sodom, the former to the immorality of the חטאים, the latter to the hardness of the heart of the רעים."

[7] Unlike the more limited demands placed on the Noahide (defined in the Talmud, Sanhedrin 56a–60a), Rabbi Hirsch teaches on Genesis 16:14 that "One only begins to be a Jew with the dedication of all the senses of the body" —that is, by faithful compliance with the "statutes" (*chukim*—חֻקִּים), which demand bodily self-control.

[8] Commentary on Genesis 17:1

[9] Jews and non-Jews have been known to mistakenly believe that "observant" (orthodox) Jews are forced somehow to obey all the commandments (pl., *mitzvot*). Although the Torah does not explicitly mention "free will" (except in regard to offerings), it makes clear the people are free to choose whether or not to obey the commandments. In Genesis 2:16-17, God commands Adam not to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, so Adam has the choice to obey or not. In Deuteronomy 30:19, we read: "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live." However, we have little choice as to the *consequences* of failing to uphold God's law. Practically, the *mitzvot* are understood to be God's gift, to help us avoid the moral and ethical pitfalls we encounter. For example, in Deuteronomy 6:24 we read: "And the Lord commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our good always, that He might preserve us alive, as it is at this day."

[10] From Psalm 73:28—קִרְבַת אֱלֹקִים לִי-טוֹב שַׁתִּי | בַאדֹנָי יְהוִה מַחְסִי לְסַפֵּר כָּל-מַלְאֲכוֹתֶיךָ | וַאֲנִי (“But as for me, the nearness of God is my good; I have made the Lord God my refuge, that I may tell of all Your works").

[11] Ibid. In a similar spirit, Psalm 23 (our © translation here) expresses for many their experience of dedication to non-material rewards, such as justice and compassion: "God is my shepherd, I lack nothing. I've been given green pastures to lie in, led to waters in places of repose, my life renewed again. And guided in the righteous paths, as befits the name of God. Though I walk in a valley of darkness, I fear no harm for you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You spread a table before me, for all my enemies to see. You anoint my head with oil, my cup is overflowing. Only goodness and love I'll pursue then, all the days of my life. And I will live in the house of God, for all my remaining years." (A recording of of this interpretive translation can be found at https://www.gatherthepeople.org/resources/Media/21_GOD_IS_MY_SHEPHERD.mp3).

[12] *Moral freedom*, the inherent potential human ability to chose between good and evil, is the cornerstone of every other kind of freedom, but especially the political and economic varieties.

[13] However, exceptions exist that enable one to navigate complex ethical situations where strict adherence to the truth might result in greater harm or conflict. Yevamot 65b teaches that one may alter the truth to preserve peace between people. Similarly, to maintain peace between a husband and wife or between friends, in some circumstances it is permissible to withhold certain truths or to present them in a less direct way. If telling the truth would lead to self-aggrandizement, altering the truth is permitted. For instance, when a person is asked if they have achieved something notable, they may minimize their accomplishments to avoid arrogance. Bava Metzia 23b-24a allows for altering the truth to protect someone's dignity, especially in cases where the truth could cause needless embarrassment. If telling the truth would put someone in physical, psychological, or emotional danger, *sometimes* it is permissible to lie. This includes situations where telling the truth could lead to unjust punishment or harm. Ketuvot 17a allows for small lies that are intended to make others feel good, such as complimenting a bride on her beauty, even if one doesn't believe she is exceptionally beautiful. The Talmud also discusses when one may lie to prevent theft.

[14] That the soul directs and governs the body is a well-established theme in Judaism, as reflected in several sources. It's implied in Berakhot 10a and Niddah 30b. Midrash Tanchuma*,* Pekudei 3 discusses the metaphor of the soul as a king and the body as the king's servant, suggesting that the soul governs the body and that the body should serve the soul's higher purposes. Maimonides (*Guide for the Perplexed*) discusses the relationship between body and soul, emphasizing that the intellect (a faculty of the soul-mind) is what truly defines a human being and that the body serves the intellect.

[15] Exodus 20:16

[16] See Moshe ben Asher, "Moral-Spiritual Infrastructure: Touchstone of Movement-Building Community Organizing," *Social Policy*, 50(4):55-64 (Winter 2020) [https://www.gatherthepeople.org/resources/Downloads/MSI_-CO.pdf].

[17] Plural of *mitzvah*, i.e., commandments

© 2026 Moshe ben Asher & Khulda Bat Sarah